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VEHICLES OF VIRTUOSITY

By HENRY McDONALD SPENCER

THE history of the stage presents the startling paradox that the "great" actors have been an actual detriment to contemporary drama. This somewhat bitter truth is strikingly illustrated in the careers of Henry Irving and Richard Mansfield, neither of whom assisted or encouraged in the slightest degree the efforts of the native dramatists of their day to produce plays of intrinsic merit. Thus the name of Henry Irving is not identified with the work of a single first-rate contemporaneous English playwright, and this during a period when the English drama was struggling to emerge from the condition of utter banality and artificiality into which it had sunk during the greater part of the nineteenth century. Sir Henry will be remembered best by his characterisation of Mathias in "The Bells," an adaptation of "Le Juif Polonais," a third-rate play by Erkman-Chatrian. Aside from "The Bells" his most notable performances were as Becket, Peter the Great, Robespierre, Richard III, Louis XI, Richelieu, and Wolsey. It is true that he appeared in "The Dancing Girl," by Henry Arthur Jones, but this play is essentially melodrama, and has little vital significance.

The position of Richard Mansfield in America was analogous to that of Irving in England, and vainly do we look in his repertory for a native play of importance. He will be associated by the historians of the drama with the part of Baron Chevrier in "The Parisian Romance," and also with Clyde Fitch's "Beau Brummel." His other chief rôles were Richard III, Jekyll and Hyde, and Prince Karl. It is to Mr. Mansfield's credit that he appeared in

two worth-while modern plays, but these were the least representative of their author. In 1894 Mansfield played Bluntschli in Bernard Shaw's "Arms and the Man," and Dick Dudgeon in "The Devil's Disciple," during the 1897 season.

Moreover, when we look back further we are struck by the fact that the importance of the performer invariably has been in inverse ratio to that of the play. From the dreary stage in the nineteenth century prior to the presentation of Piner's "The Second Mrs. Tanqueray," in 1893, we readily recall the names of Edmund Kean, Macready, Kemble, Mrs. Siddons, Edwin Forrest, Booth, Barrett, and Joseph Jefferson.

On the other hand no play of any significance was written in English during the period from the production of Sheridan's "School for Scandal" in 1777, until the performance of Tom Robertson's "Caste," in 1867, and the latter is noted principally because it was condemned by the critics as "absurdly realistic," and because the author is the father of the "cup and saucer" drama of the nineties. When the current of fresh ideas, stimulated by Ibsen, began to be felt in the theatre, the actors receded in importance and no longer overshadowed the dramatist—the latter, in spite of the present prominence of the producer, must be reckoned as the true artist of the theatre. No one, for example, thinks of the name of any particular performer in Galsworthy's plays. Thus we conclude that as a good wine needs no bush, so a really first-rate play does not need a notable mime to enhance its value, and furthermore that the mummer is averse to the competition of the

playwright. The actor does not seek a vital play but merely a vehicle for his own virtuosity.

Opinions may differ as to the merits of Mrs. Fiske's histrionic ability, but there is no doubt that she is becoming a classic of our stage, and like our other classics she shows a disposition to confine herself to plays that are written to express the performer in terms of dramaturgy rather than to express the author's reaction to life. It is true that she headed one of the first of the players' revolts against the theatre, and that she produced Ibsen in the nineties, when it was rather a daring thing to do; nevertheless, of recent years she has not identified herself with the intense, psychologic drama of the day—a class of drama in which she might well succeed. Her tendency, on all fours with that of the late Sir Beerbohm Tree and George Arliss, is shown by her appearance in "Madame Sand" at the Criterion Theatre, in which, of course, she plays the eponymous part.

The Philip Moeller play is hardly a play at all in the sense of being an organic whole, but is rather a series of loosely related episodes in the life of George Sand. Any one of the acts might be given separately as a short play, or the series could be reversed, or started from the middle, and the dramatic action still would be coherent. Viewed, however, as an expression of Mrs. Fiske, none could fit her more perfectly, and I do not think that she has ever appeared to better advantage. Her mannerisms are not so much in evidence, and her voice is quite distinct—due perhaps to the masculine tone which quite properly she adopts. There is a robustness, a plasticity to her acting which leaves nothing to be desired in her characterisation of the predatory authoress. Her cigar-smoking is positively unctuous.

Mrs. Fiske, to be sure, cannot be

blamed for wanting to display her own goods, and no matter how much we may deplore her apparent lack of sympathy with the things of the theatre that are really worthy, yet we can thank her for having afforded us a pleasant evening. The other characters are well taken, and the production, by Arthur Hopkins, is beyond all cavil.

Mr. Leo Ditrichstein also may be suspected of a liking for personal vehicles, but he gives you a joy-ride in "The King," at the George M. Cohan theatre, and much may be forgiven in consequence. Surely even the Bolsheviki could not really hate such a merry monarch as the King of Moldavia, who might well be regarded as the Father of his Country. He has at least the advantage of revolutionaries in that he has a keen sense of the ridiculous; but then no one with humor could be a successful revolutionary. Ditrichstein's king is a very smart, up-to-date, human sort of a king, not at all the Ruretanian type as depicted in "The Prisoner of Zenda," and he is just the sort of king that one would like to be oneself. In this respect the trio of authors, de Caillavet, de Flers, and Arene—they sound like a group of Parisian perfumes—have achieved an artistic success. Boiled down, the play could be adapted to a Little Theatre programme. There are many quick lines, and the most unpromising puritan would hardly find fault with the risqué suggestions as the performance was all so delightfully artificial.

You will not find Bohemia on the map, it has no geographical boundaries but exists in the heart of men. The Philistines never will understand the gypsies, and Respectability from the parish pump regards them as vagrom persons to be dealt with by the beadle. On the other hand the gypsies are like little children at play who

do not realise why they are scolded by their elders. In "The Gypsy Trail," at the Plymouth, the author, Mr. Robert Housum, seems to miss the point that, next to death, the supreme adventure of life is marriage, and that a trip in the subway may be as exciting as a trip on a South Sea whaler.

The play might have been entitled "The Call of the Tame," although as a box-office attraction "The Gypsy Trail" probably has its advantages. The action turns on the longing of a young girl for Romance and Adventure, but when the opportunity presents itself she decides in favor of a church wedding, a house in town, and all that goes with it. Mr. Ernst Glendenning as the gypsy, and Mr. Roland Young as the Philistine divide the acting honours.

At the Hudson Theatre "The Pipes of Pan" summon a middle-aged couple to the gypsy trail, but the Call of the Conventional comes to them in the form of the sixteen-year old son of the lady gypsy, a new automobile, and a twenty-dollar order for flowers from the husband. As the escapade consisted in nothing more than a visit to an all-night costumed ball, winding up with breakfast at a Child's restaurant, the return to respectability did not involve any serious jar on the machinery. Norman Trevor, the policeman of Barrie's "A Kiss for Cinderella," was very acceptable as the chief Bohemian, and Janet Beecher, who just misses being a very handsome woman but is, instead, a very piquant one, admirably assisted the stage traffic.

Remains then another actorial vehicle, this time bearing Lou Tellegen, who admits that he is a "matinee idol." "Blind Youth," by Lou Tellegen and Willard Mack, is acted by Lou Tellegen under the management of Lou Tellegen, at the Republic Theatre. This play is obviously

"by and for" actors, and contains an unusual number of sure-fire hits in the dialogue, inserted, I suspect, by Mr. Mack. Also a number of tried and true situations from the Old Guard of melodrama—Mr. Tellegen, very pale and dissipated-looking in the first act—every one playing up to him; Mr. Tellegen quite pale and sentimental in the second act; Mr. Tellegen very noble and self-sacrificing in the last act. Incidentally, Mr. Tellegen, actor, is far superior to Mr. Tellegen, playwright—even *cum* Mack.

By the way, it is rather unusual for a man—a Frenchman and an artist—to deliver long lectures to ladies expressing disesteem of fleshly love as compared to the "other kind," or, in other words, that the chief impelling instinct of our lives, next to hunger, should be a mere by-product, as it were, of the "right kind of love." It is the general experience of men that it is the lady as a rule who delivers these homilies, and Blake tells us that, "Even the lust of the goat is to the glory of God."

As a by-product of æsthetic revolt there is a tendency to mistake the bizarre for the beautiful, eccentricity for originality, and to deem a thing good merely because it is opposed to something bad. In an effort to escape the superficial "prettiness" of Broadway, The Washington Square Players fall into the extreme of unrelieved sombreness. To avoid pink they paint in gray monotone. Thus in last month's bill the opening play, "Neighbors," by Zona Gale, is drab; the second, by Samuel Kaplan, "The Critic's Comedy," is pathetic, and the Dreiser play, "The Girl in the Coffin" is gruesome. Throughout the series there is a general impression of the futility of life, and it conveys the feeling of fatigue, of weariness with existence, of the ache of modernity. The futuristic pantomime

at the end is whimsical enough, but it comes too late to save the evening. For it is by the aggregate of the impressions, as well as by the merits of each piece individually, that a series of short plays must be judged.

As an expression of life in terms of the theatre "The Critic's Comedy" is the best of the trio. It contains humor, knowledge of human nature, and a bitter truth—the tragedy which all of us must face, soon or late, to wit: Time will not be denied. An elderly lady critic com-

mits the folly of marrying a young gentleman of the Broadway type and fancies that she can hold him by sentimental or sexual appeal, whereas he regards her merely as an income.

The Dreiser play rings false throughout; it is strained, theatrical in the disparaging sense, amateurish in development, and it is further evidence that the play and the novel are distinct forms of art. Mr. Dreiser is easily the foremost novelist of America; he is easily the hindmost dramatist of Washington Square.

ELEGY ON THE DEATH OF JULIET'S OWL

BY MAURICE BARING

Juliet has lost her little downy owl,
The bird she loved more than all other
birds:

He was a darling bird, so white, so
wise,
Like a monk hooded in a snowy cowl,
With sun-shy scholar's eyes.
He hooted softly in diminished thirds,
And when he asked for mice,
He took refusal with a silent pride—
And never pleaded twice.
He was a wondrous bird, as dignified
As any Diplomat
That ever sat
That ever sat
By the round table of a Conference.

He was delicious, loveable and soft.
He understood the meaning of the night
And read the riddle of the smiling stars.
When he took flight
And roosted high aloft,
Beyond the shrubbery and the garden
fence,
He would return and seek his safer
bars,
All of his own accord; and he would
plead
Forgiveness for the trouble and the
search

And for the anxious heart he caused to
bleed,
And settle once again upon his perch,

And utter a propitiating note
And take the heart
Of Juliet by his pretty winning ways.
His was the art
Of pleasing without effort easily.
His fluffy throat
His sage round eye
Sad with old knowledge, bright with
young amaze
Where are they now? ah! where!
Perchance in the pale halls of Hecate
Or in the poplars of Elysium
He wanders careless and completely free.
But in the regions dumb,
And in the pallid air,
He will not find a sweet, caressing hand
Like Juliet's; nor in all that glimmering
land
Shall he behold a silver planet rise
As splendid as the light of Juliet's eyes.
Therefore in weeping with you, Juliet,
Oh! let us not forget
To drop with sprigs of rosemary and rue,
A not untimely tear
Upon the bier,
Of him who lost so much in losing you.

—*The New Witness, London.*